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OJINAGA DRUG LORDS SENTENCED TO LIFE IN FEDERAL PRISON WITHOUT PAROLE

(MIDLAND, TEXAS) United States Attorney Johnny Sutton announced today that 33-year-old **FRANCISCO RIOS BALDERRAMA** and 34-year-old **ARMANDO GARCIA QUIROZ** were sentenced to life imprisonment without parole for running a continuing criminal enterprise that distributed over 30,000 kilograms of marijuana through the West Texas area and other parts of the United States.

“Francisco Balderrama and Armando Quiroz are going to spend the rest of their lives in a federal penitentiary for shipping approximately 75 tons of marijuana into the Western District of Texas and murdering American citizens in the process,” stated United States Attorney Johnny Sutton. “These life sentences should send a chilling message to drug dealers that selling drugs in Texas comes at a very high cost, namely the possibility of spending the rest of your life behind bars.”

A third defendant in this case, 40-year-old **LUCIANO CHAPA** was sentenced this afternoon to ten years imprisonment for his role in the drug trafficking organization. On September 17, 2002, a jury convicted Balderrama, Quiroz and Chapa on various drug and money laundering charges following 13 days of trial and three days of deliberation over a four-week period. Balderrama and Quiroz were convicted of the continuing criminal enterprise charge, nine counts of possession with intent to distribute marijuana, four counts of money laundering and one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering. All three defendants were found guilty of conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute more than 1,000 kilograms of marijuana and conspiracy to import from Mexico to the United States more than 1,000 kilograms of marijuana.

Balderrama, a/k/a “Kiko,” Quiroz, a/k/a “Mando,” and 33-year-old **RUBEN VALDEZ CARRASCO** were known as the “Los Tres De La Sierra” or the “The Three of the Mountain.” Their organization was responsible for the importation and distribution of marijuana from Mexico to the United States and the drug proceeds from the United States back to Mexico. The three defendants “held the Plaza” in Ojinaga, Chihuahua, Mexico, for marijuana distribution to the United States; that is to say that they received and sold all the marijuana shipped from Mexico through the United States via the Ojinaga, Chihuahua, Mexico region. Testimony at trial indicated that for a ten-week period after their capture, no large loads of marijuana were sent through the Ojinaga area into the United States. On October 2, 2001, Carrasco pled guilty to one count of running a continuing criminal enterprise. He was sentenced on January 7, 2002, to 252 months in federal prison.

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During the course of the continuing criminal enterprise, the Los Tres De La Sierra Organization imported to and distributed in the United States over 150,000 pounds or over 68,000 kilograms of marijuana. Each marijuana load imported and distributed by the defendants weighed up to 2500 pounds. Each pound of marijuana cost Balderrama, Quiroz, and Carrasco about \$50 and sold for \$350 per pound. The defendants would sell quantities of marijuana by “fronting” it to the purchaser. “Fronting” is selling the marijuana on consignment; that is, the Los Tres De La Sierra Organization would distribute the marijuana to the purchaser and the purchaser would sell the marijuana and give the money owed back to the defendants.

The defendants kept control of their organization and their marijuana inventory through the use of intimidation and murder. Balderrama was the overall leader of the organization. Quiroz was a partner and Balderrama’s “right-hand man.” The evidence at trial showed that Balderrama ordered and Quiroz murdered at least five individuals to keep control of their drug organization. Chapa drove marijuana loads and was referred to by Balderrama as one of “his most loyal runners.”

The three defendants were initially arrested based on a sealed federal complaint out of Alpine, Texas, charging them with conspiracy to distribute over 1,000 kilograms of marijuana. Based on that complaint, the United States Attorney’s Office with the assistance of the Department of Justice’s Office of International Affairs, obtained provisional arrest warrants from the Australian courts. In an amazing display of national and international cooperation and coordination, Balderrama and Quiroz were arrested on an airplane about to leave the terminal to fly to Buenos Aires, Argentina, by Australian authorities within 28 hours of DEA receiving a tip from an alert U.S. Customs officer in Honolulu that the three were in Sydney for the Olympics. At the United States Attorney’s Office request, the Australian authorities allowed Carrasco to board the flight going through Hawaii so that American authorities could make the arrest and avoid the extradition treaty process. On September 11, 2001, Balderrama and Quiroz stole an 18-wheeler and crashed out of and escaped from the high-security Parklea Prison in Sydney, Australia. The Australian Federal Police and the New South Wales Police recaptured the two fugitives on October 1, 2001, in Victoria.

In Mexico, President Vicente Fox’s administration dealt another heavy blow to Las Tres de la Sierra organization by executing three U.S. arrest requests and apprehending other major players involved in the drug organization: Ismael Espudo, 60, Emilio Rito Mendoza, 42, and Hector Ivan Armendariz, 30. Mendoza waived extradition to the U.S., pleaded guilty, and cooperated with law enforcement. Espudo also waived extradition and pleaded guilty. Armendariz is still fighting his extradition. On January 8, 2002, Mendoza was sentenced to 22 months in federal prison. On January 9, 2002, Espudo was sentenced to 168 months in federal prison.

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The drug investigation was primarily conducted by the Drug Enforcement Administration Task Forces in Alpine, Midland, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Waco, Texas and Kansas. The murder investigations were conducted by the Texas Rangers. Integral to the drug investigation were the Midland Police Department, the United States Border Patrol, the Internal Revenue Service - Criminal Investigation, and the United States Custom Service. Assistant United States Attorneys Mark Roomberg and Jay Miller handled the prosecution for the government. Sutton commended the outstanding investigative and prosecutorial efforts of all those involved in bringing the Los Tres De La Sierra and their drug trafficking organization to justice. "The United States Attorney's Office along with every federal, state, and local law enforcement officer in this District will continue our diligent effort with our national and international partners to put drug dealers where they belong, behind bars."

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